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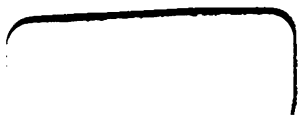


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FERGUSON
STRATEGIST

LOWELL HARDY

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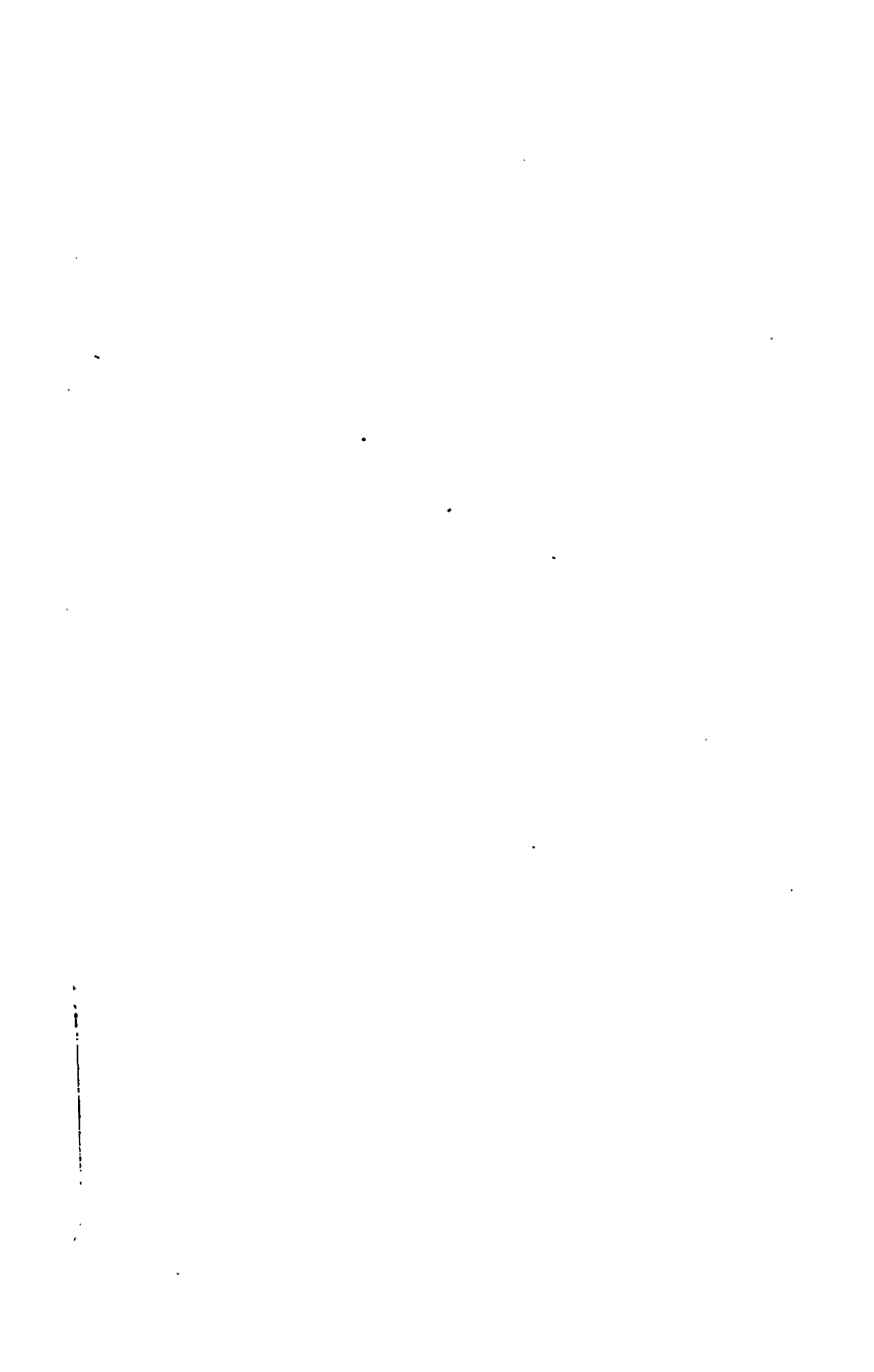
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FROSTY FERGUSON:
STRATEGIST ∴ ∴

LOWELL HARDY







“Good-by, Bat, I must be going.”
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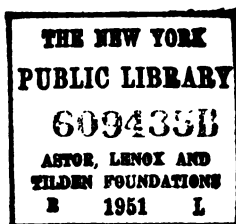
FROSTY FERGUSON ∴ STRATEGIST ∴

By
LOWELL HARDY

Illustrations by
WILL CRAWFORD

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**FROSTY FERGUSON:
STRATEGIST ∴ ∴**



FROSTY FERGUSON: STRATEGIST

THE corral gate was pushed open a few inches from the inside and Mr. Bat Henderson stuck his head through the aperture. He peered cautiously at the ranch-house. Seeing no sign of the enemy, he led his buckskin pony out and closed the gate noiselessly after him.

He gave a low whistle.

The big hound whose agreeable companionship Mr. Henderson desired on his ride to Four Horse Flat lay asleep in the doorway of the house. No other life was visible. Mr. Henderson waited. The hound dreamed peacefully on.

Bat uttered a little cough.

No result.

He tried another, a trifle louder, and glanced hastily at the open door as, to his apprehensive ears, the modest cough rang out on the still mountain air like an Indian war whoop. But the dog stirred not. Mr. Henderson muttered a low imprecation and stood looking helplessly about him with the bridle reins hanging loose in his hand. Then he fixed his gaze again upon the dog and stared hard at the unconscious animal for a full minute.

The hound moved uneasily. Suddenly he caught sight of his master. Mr. Henderson was beckoning to him earnestly with his right hand, and with his left he seductively patted his knee.

The hound got up hurriedly and started toward him. Halfway across the open space he quickened his gait and glanced furtively back over his shoulder at the house. At this

moment, from the doorway came a voice in hoarse command:

"Come back here, Rusty!"

The dog stopped short with a discouraged yelp. The hair along his spine rose stiffly. His tail dropped, and he rolled his eyes and looked beseechingly at his master.

Mr. Henderson drew a long, exasperated breath and glared angrily at the house. He waited a moment. Nobody appeared. Turning his back, he mounted his horse and started boldly off.

"Come on, old boy," he called to the dog, and Rusty again bounded joyfully toward him.

"Come back here, sir!" came in stern accents from the house, in excellent imitation of Mr. Henderson's voice.

The dog stopped, whining uneasily, and casting sheepish glances back toward the house. Doubt and indecision showed in every line of his body.

"Damn him!" said Bat, shaking his fist at the unseen speaker. "I'll twist his cussed head off one of these times!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came in ribald tones from the enemy. "You're a liar and a hoss thief!"

The outraged Mr. Henderson stared fixedly at the doorway for a minute, and then looked back at the dog crouching on the ground. He raised his voice. "Hi! you, Uncle Nat!" he shouted.

A wizened, baldheaded little man with sparse greyish whiskers came to the door and peered out.

"What's the matter?" he inquired mildly. "Want your coat? It's turnin' kinder co—"

"No, I don't!" shouted Mr. Henderson forcefully. "I want you to shut that parrot of yours up and let me call my dog along or I'll come back there and wring his neck!"

Mr. Nanny looked reproachfully at the speaker. "I'm surprised at you," he said in shocked tones. "You ought to be ashamed



“What’s the matter?” he inquired mildly.
“Want your coat?”

of yourself. A great, big, hulkin' feller like you a-talkin' that way about a poor, defenceless bird that has no father or mother and only one friend in the world, and he just a poor, worn-out old has-been that any old, one-eyed hoss is good enough for—!"

Mr. Henderson voiced a feeble groan. He looked desperately about him. Jerking the buckskin's head suddenly around, he jabbed the big Mexican spurs into its sides and made his escape down the road at a gallop, followed by the grateful Rusty.

Out of sight beyond a turn he pulled his pony down to a walk and gave a deep sigh. He dug the "makings" from the pocket of his leather chaps and shook his head slowly as he rolled a cigarette.

"Damn him!" he said helplessly. "He's getting worse and worse. I 'most wish I'd let him drown, and that cussed parrot with him." Bat scratched the match across the back of his saddle and lit the cigarette. "I

never figured saving a man's life was such a complicated proposition as all this," he worried. "I wonder if I ever will get rid of him." The lifesaver sighed heavily and rode slowly on his way.

Arriving at the stage station, Mr. Henderson dismounted before the New Orleans Saloon and tied his buckskin to the rail. He then sought out his friend and mentor, Mr. Frosty Ferguson.

"Look a-here, Frosty," he began, "you remember that old coot I dragged out of the river maybe a month back?"

Mr. Ferguson signified that he did.

"Well," continued Bat, "I've got to get rid of him. Him and his parrot are still camping down on me up there at the ranch and they're jest a-pesterin' the very life out of me!"

"I know just how you feel, Bat," observed Frosty sympathetically. "I suppose he keeps a-thanking you, and a-God-blessing you, and

calling you his preserver from morning till night. Wants to try to repay—”

“You’re way off,” interrupted Mr. Henderson shortly. “In this here business of savin’ lives I see you got the old-fashioned idea of what’s due to a party that saves you from a watery grave in the quick-sand.” He gazed fixedly at Mr. Ferguson. “What would you think,” continued Mr. Henderson slowly, “of a sport that sits calmly down after bein’ rescued and asks you, now that you went ahead and saved him without his permission, what you’re goin’ to do with him?”

“I’d think he was crazy,” returned Mr. Ferguson with conviction.

Bat nodded. “When this party missed the ford at Battle Meadow crossing that day, he lost his wagon and his old crowbait horses and everything else he owned on earth except the parrot, which he was a-clingin’ to like a nigger to a ham bone when I dragged him

out. They both bein' helpless and most drowned, I took them home to the ranch and sat up all night with them, a-keepin' him warm and a-givin' him hot drinks and a-dryin' out the parrot."

Mr. Ferguson gave a commendatory nod.

"In the morning," continued Bat, "I fried him some ham and made a pot of coffee and brought it to him, and what do you think he said?"

Frosty couldn't think.

" 'Did you freshen this here ham,' he says, 'in water before you fried it?'

"I said I didn't, never having heard of such a proposition before.

" 'Well,' says he, 'that's the only way to fix ham fit to eat!'—and he gave it to the dog.

"He tasted the coffee," went on the injured host, "and then he got up with the cup in his hand and went outside and poured it on a bush a-growin' alongside the door and stood

a-watchin' the bush. It was blame good coffee, too," he added aggrievedly. "I made it same as we always do. You know—four or five handfuls of coffee and a dipper of water."

Mr. Ferguson nodded concurringly.

"He makes the coffee now himself," Bat continued, "and I drink condensed milk. I stood out for two weeks on the ham proposition, but he went 'round lookin' so abused that I finally had to give in. I used to like ham, too," observed the narrator plaintively, "and I hated to spoil it by a-soakin' all the taste out of it before I fried it; but I couldn't stand him a-goin' 'round with that sufferin' look on his face and a-describing to me while I ate my dinner what it was a-doin' to my insides."

Bat paused and gazed helplessly at his friend.

"How about the parrot?" inquired Frosty, interested.

"Damn the parrot!" said Bat forcibly.

"Why don't you throw them both out?" asked Frosty, grinning.

"Well, I s'pose I ought to," Bat said finally, taking off his hat and running his fingers through his hair. "But you see it's like this, Frosty: He takes the ground that I went ahead and saved his life without consulting him and now it's up to me to look after him. He says he didn't ask me to save him and if I ain't goin' to take care of him properly, why didn't I let him drown in peace. He's got me all mixed up." Bat looked appealingly at Mr. Ferguson and mopped his perplexed face.

"Well, what do you think of that for a high, wide and handsome idea?" observed that gentleman admiringly.

"He's kicking now about the hoss I give him to ride," Bat went on plaintively. "It's my old Pinto, and a good hoss, too. He lost out a eye somewhere, which nacherly don't improve his looks any; but he's plenty good

enough for a old feller like him to ride and a durn sight better hoss than them he lost in the river. He don't use any reason that's what he don't."

"The thing for you to do, Bat, is to chase him right off the place," said Frosty, firmly. "Won't he go?"

"Sure, he'll go all right," answered Bat, "but I'm ashamed to make him. And besides," he added, "he's a good-hearted old cuss, too. He's always after me to put on a coat when I go out, or to change my boots if I get them wet, and he's a-dopin' me all the time with onion syrup or some such mess he concocts. You'd think—to see him—I was some feeble old lady that was bein' kept alive only by lovin' care and nursin'. It's fierce!" he added with a groan.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" inquired Mr. Ferguson after a moment's sympathetic pause.

"I want you to figure out a scheme for get-

ting rid of him without hurting his feelings, and I know you're just the one to do it."

"All right," replied Frosty, frowning heavily. "I'll undertake it. She's going to require a little study and thought, but the human mind is a wonderful thing, and when you know how to use it you can get wonderful results. Leave it to me. I'll think it out."

"Come on across to the Golden Rule and think," urged Bat, taking Frosty by the arm. "I'm going to buy five dollars' worth of good fried ham that hasn't been freshened, and eat it, with a gallon of real, gen-u-wine coffee on the side."

One morning, a week later, when Frosty rode up to Bat's ranch, he was gratified to see the result of his brain work in the shape of the pinto pony, in company with a loaded pack mule, standing before the house ready



“The thing for you to do, Bat, is to chase him right off the place,” said Frosty, firmly.

for a journey. He tied his horse to the fence and went in.

"Why, hello, Uncle Nat," he exclaimed in accents of strong amazement, bestowing a meaning wink upon Bat. "Decided to go prospecting, did you?"

Mr. Nanny grunted.

"An old prospector like you is sure to strike it rich up there in that Meadow Lake country," continued Frosty glibly. "Those samples I showed you came right from there last week. I envy you your chance."

"You kin hev it," said Mr. Nanny generously. He waved his hand toward the outfit. "Take 'em and go 'long."

"No, I can't go right now," Frosty explained, "and I wouldn't want to take your place anyway."

"Don't think of me," urged Uncle Nat. "I won't mind a mite. I'm used to bein' put to one side fer others. It's gettin' pretty late in the year fer me to be leavin', anyway—

with Christmas a-comin' on, too, an' nothin' done towards it yet, so far as I kin see. It beats me the kind of bringin'-up you fellers must hev had!"

"Don't you go worrying over Christmas and such yet a while," offered Frosty, grinning at Bat behind Mr. Nanny's back and choosing to ignore the reflection cast upon his early training. "She's a couple of months away, so far, and lots can happen by that time. Hadn't you better be getting started now?" he suggested, as Mr. Nanny slowly finished his third cup of coffee and glanced around for the pot, which Frosty hastily captured and emptied into his own cup.

Mr. Nanny eyed his companion with some disfavour. "What's your hurry?" he asked, reaching slowly for his corn-cob. "Can't I take time to fill my pipe?"

"Here, have this cigar," said Frosty hurriedly, offering Uncle Nat the Havana he had been saving to smoke on Sunday.

Mr. Nanny accepted it resentfully. He smelt of it, examined the band in detail, and, after hesitating doubtfully for several moments, lighted it.

Frosty glared at him. "Come along, now," he said in a hard voice, when Uncle Nat had finally gotten the cigar going to his satisfaction.

The plotters escorted the reluctant traveller out to the road, where the pinto pony and the pack mule, loaded with provisions and blankets sufficient for an arctic expedition, stood ready for the voyager. Here considerable time was consumed in a minute veterinary examination which Uncle Nat made of the pack mule and in the heated argument which resulted when he discovered a ring-bone on that animal. He was finally almost lifted into the saddle by the indignant Frosty.

"Good-bye," said Mr. Nanny in a resigned voice, as he picked up the reins. "Sharper

than a sarpint's tooth is a ungrateful child,' is all I kin think of when I see myself bein' sent out into the world on a old pinto hoss with one eye and a-leadin' of a ringboned mule. Good-bye." And he rode away.

At the turn of the road he looked back. "Don't fergit to take them dandelion bitters regular," he shouted to Bat. "The onion syrup is on the shelf, and don't fergit to feed James!"

Bat waved his hand and went into the house where he gathered up the bottles and hurled them viciously out of the window.

"There's a fine idea, now isn't it—that business he got off about Christmas!" protested Bat, staring down the road after his late boarder. "What does he think we're a-runnin' here, anyway—a cattle ranch or a Sunday school? Christmas is for kids, ain't it!"

"The way most people look at it she is, but that wouldn't influence him any, if he

was going to be here—which he isn't," returned Frosty easily. "It's a good thing for us I got rid of him in time or, chances are, he'd have us a-hanging up our stockings and stringing pop-corn. He has a mighty convincing way with him when he takes a notion."

Bat agreed dumbly.

Once again real coffee, peace, and fried ham "à la naturelle," reigned on the ranch, and the emancipated Mr. Henderson, with James, the parrot, as his sole companion, enjoyed the undisputed possession of his home.

One day, two weeks after Uncle Nat's departure, Bat had ridden into Four Horse Flat and, in company with the leading citizens of that metropolis, was waiting on the platform before the stage company's office for the mail to be distributed.

Mr. Frosty Ferguson was entertaining the gathering meanwhile with a dissertation on

the subject of "The Superiority of Brain Work Over Mere Animal Force."

"Strategy," observed Mr. Ferguson largely, as he leaned back against a convenient post and faced his audience, ranged up along the building, "is what the really great minds of the world use in accomplishing what you would probably try to do by brute force." Mr. Ferguson rearranged the bandana knotted at his neck and gave a slight cough. "Here was this Nanny man," he continued, "a-battening on, and a-sucking of, the life blood of our little friend, Mr. Henderson.

"Mr. Henderson calls on me," continued Frosty, "his intellect being sort of feeble when it comes to problems requiring deep thought, and what did I do? Did I grab this goat man, and run him off the reservation by force? No, sir. I used strategy! I told him all about the big gold strikes being made up around Meadow Lake, where they

were taking out the nuggets with hay hooks, 'till I got him to join the rush. That's what I call brain work—strategy!"

"It is, is it?" sourly observed Mr. Gunsight Doolittle, who had expected something more exciting. "I'd call it lyin'. Huh! The world is full of them kind of strategists."

Mr. Ferguson gave him a look eloquent of his contempt for such simple-mindedness, and continued, upheld by the scornful patience of the higher mind.

"That being a busted country up there, our friend will go bust likewise and, not being able to get back," concluded Mr. Ferguson grinning pleasantly, "why, there he is!"

"How d'ye do, everybody!" said a cheerful voice from the road, and Frosty, starting violently, turned to see Uncle Nat dismounting from the pinto.

Mr. Nanny appeared to be in a remarkably pleasant frame of mind and prosperous state of dress for a man in such dire financial

distress as Mr. Ferguson had just pictured. He was smoking a large, black cigar, a new hat was set rakishly on one side of his head, and a pair of shining, new boots encased his feet. Uncle Nat glanced down at the bright silk handkerchief that peeped from his coat pocket and removed the cigar from his mouth.

"Hev you all been struck dumb?" he inquired, agreeably when his salutation went unanswered.

"No, we're all right, Uncle Nat," replied Mr. Doolittle gleefully. "How are you, anyway? You're looking fine. Where did you make the raise? Your friend, Mr. Ferguson, here, was just saying that—"

"Never mind what I was saying," interrupted Frosty hastily. "Let's all have a drink. Come on, Uncle Nat." He caught him by the arm and all moved in a body to the cool interior of the New Orleans.

"Did you find a gold mine?" inquired Mr.

Doolittle, when Mr. Nanny had taken his refreshment and was preparing to start for the ranch.

"Nope," responded Uncle Nat promptly. "There's no gold up there." He eyed Frosty severely for a moment.

"Well, how did you do it, then?" persisted Mr. Doolittle, curiously.

"A-buyin' gold bricks," replied Mr. Nanny calmly. "I made two hundred dollars that way, and then I sold the pack mule—he was no good—ringboned, I told you he was—"

"Tell us about the gold bricks," suggested Frosty with sand-paper in his voice.

"Oh, there's nothin' much to tell," Mr. Nanny responded modestly. "You see, it was like this." He settled himself back against the rail. "I wuz up there in Copper City a-nosin' 'round, and one day a fine-dressed young feller, with a big di'mond pin and gold watch chain on, came up to me and he says: 'Me and my pal hev got a gold

brick which,' he says, 'we bought cheap from a Indian, which stole it from a quartz mill up in the mountains. My pardner and me hev got to hev some money. He won't trust me with the brick, but if you'll come along up to the cabin with me and see it you kin buy him out fer eight hundred dollars. It's worth five thousand.'

"Of course, I didn't hev any eight hundred dollars, but I thought mebbe I might be able to get holt of some where they seemed to be so much layin' 'round loose, so I went along.

"We went out to the cabin, and as soon as we got near it the feller inside begun to cough fit to bust and I wuz afraid he wouldn't last 'til we got there. We went in and the sick man dug out the brick from between the blankets and showed it to me. It wasn't nothin' but a chunk of brass plated over, and I knowed it the minit I seed it. Them two wuz bunco men and I made up my mind to up and teach 'em a lesson, so I figured around

a while with 'em and tried to jew the sick feller down. Then they began to get peevish, and the fust feller called me outside.

“‘Are you a-goin’ to buy?’ says he, pretty short.

“I took him by the arm and led him over to the woodshed where they wuz some old pick handles and axes and things layin’ ’round, and I says to him, ‘What’s the use?’ says I.

“‘What do you mean?’ says he. ‘Ain’t money any object to you!’

“‘I mean this,’ says I. ‘What’s the use of us a-payin’ your pardner good coin for that brick? He’s pretty near dead, anyway. Let’s take a couple of clubs and beat his brains out and get the brick for nothin’,’ and I picked up the axe and started for the house.”

Mr. Nanny gazed calmly about him at the circle of his horrified friends. For a minute nobody spoke.

"W-what did he do then?" asked Mr. Doo-little in awed tones.

Mr. Nanny grinned pleasantly. "He gave me two hundred dollars to go 'way and not kill his pardner," he said simply, "and I went."

After thanking Frosty for his refreshment Uncle Nat mounted the pinto and rode off home amid a dead silence.

He at once unhesitatingly resumed his old position at the ranch and Bat weakly submitted. On the morning following his return, after taking Bat severely to task for the way he had kept house during his absence and when he had put him through a close examination as to the whereabouts of the bottles of home remedies he had left on the shelf and which had unaccountably disappeared, Mr. Nanny demanded of Bat whether he and Frosty had made out their Christmas lists.

"Christmas whats!" repeated Bat, staring.

Uncle Nat regarded him pityingly for a moment.

"Didn't you ever hev any raisin' at all, where you come from?" he asked scathingly. "You wasn't brought up a Cannibal, wuz you? How do you s'pose a body's to know what to give you if you don't write out a list of what you want? I'm workin' on mine now and it's most done. I got eighteen on it."

"You mean we got to give you eighteen pr—!" began Bat, pricked into speech.

"Of course you don't hev to give me more'n one of 'em if you don't want to," proceeded Mr. Nanny, taking no cognisance of the interruption, "if anybody wants to be mean. It's a good way to find out about people. You jest pick and choose out of the list. Some don't do it, but it's the best way, so's not to hev mistakes made. I don't want any more slippers and I won't hev 'em! My legs gits cold when I got 'em on. I remember one

year that I`didn't make my list and seven pairs wuz give me. I got pneumonia twicet that winter on account of 'em."

"We don't have Christmas much up in these parts," explained Bat cautiously. "You see, it kinder takes women and kids and, er—Christmas trees and things to make a Christmas and we don't have 'em."

"Shucks!" grunted Uncle Nat. "That ain't the pint. Christmas ain't a time or a place, or people: it's a feelin'! You got to feel right and the rest'll do. Mebbe you wasn't ready for it is the reason you never had any Christmas. You fellers git to work on them lists."

"It's more than a month yet before she's due," hesitated Bat, seeking to avoid the issue and keep the peace. "We've got plenty of time."

"That's right! Put everything off 'til the very last minit," Mr. Nanny reprimanded. "Never think of anybody but yourself!

How do I know but they'll be things on your lists that'll hev to be made; and makin' Christmas things takes time. I s'pose you'd like nothin' better than to see me a-sittin' up 'til midnight the last week or two a-wearin' out my eyes by candle-light all on account of you two, big, hulkin' loafers. Git on out to your work. What are you idlin' here for!"

Bat endured this sort of treatment for ten days, but at the end of that time when he discovered one morning Mr. Nanny chasing Rusty with a club because that long-suffering brute refused to come when James called him, Bat struck.

"It's getting to be something fierce," said he with a worried expression on his countenance as he laid the matter before Mr. Ferguson, whom he met coming from town. "He's after me all the time about something. He jumped on me yesterday and most licked me because I hid my coat out in the barn so

I wouldn't have to wear it to town, and he made me sit up for a hour last night with my feet in a pail of mustard and water because I got my boots wet. It mighty near blistered the skin off me. I can't stand it much longer!"

"You're sure having a hard time of it," agreed Frosty sympathetically. "Are you going over to the dance at Hayfork to-night?" he inquired with the benevolent idea of getting his friend's mind off his troubles. "They're going to have a big time, I hear."

"No, I reckon I won't go," answered Bat, regretfully. "He makes such a fuss about it if I get home after eleven o'clock that I don't enjoy myself. I have to keep looking at the clock all the time and it makes me sorter nervous."

"What does he do, lick you if you come in late?" inquired Frosty with scorn.

"No, he don't lick me exactly," replied Bat slowly, "but he talks to me about how

I'm a-dissipatin' my youth and vigour and a-debauchin' of my soul, which he says is 'hair hung and breeze shaken over hell,' 'til I could tear a limb off a tree with my bare teeth!"

"The old rip!" observed Frosty with ready sympathy.

"You remember that last dance we went to over on Hat Creek here a week ago," continued Bat plaintively. "Well, when I got home it was pretty near daylight. I took off my boots and sneaked in and got about half undressed, when he woke up.

"That you?" says he, pretty short.

"Yes, sir," I answered him, shakin'.

"What are you gettin' up so early for?" he says, and I had to stay up.—There's nothin' funny about it." Bat glared at the grinning Mr. Ferguson.

"Do you know where he is now, and what he's doing?" inquired Frosty, after a moment's silence.

"No, I don't. And I don't care, either," replied Bat sententiously.

"When I left the Flat he was in the New Orleans entertaining a little circle of your friends with an account of your meannesses and trying to kill his sorrow with Dan Wilson's snake poison. He feels so bad over your ingratitude, after all he's done for you, that he's gone off on a time to forget his wrongs."

"What'll I do?" said Bat, gazing helplessly at Frosty. "Can't I ever get rid of him?"

For a minute Mr. Ferguson engaged in silent thought. Suddenly a great light shone on that schemer's face, and, reaching over, he grabbed his friend by the arm.

"Come here!" he said, nearly dragging him from his horse. Bat clung to his saddle horn and listened while Frosty, after peering cautiously about him at the rocks and timber on the mountainside, whispered in his ear,

Bat listened intently. A broad smile slowly appeared upon his face, and then he began to laugh. He slapped his leather leggings a mighty smack and gave a loud "Whoop-ee!" while he spurred his pony into a buck jump to express his delight. Frosty sat back and looked with complacent dignity upon the unseemly antics of his friend.

"It's nothing," he said with a little cough. "Brains and strategy is what does it. Now I'll go and get him."

He gathered up his reins and turned his pony toward town. "I'll be back soon," he called out as he rode off, "you be ready." About dusk he returned with Mr. Nanny somewhat mellow, and turned him over to his fellow-conspirator. He then hurriedly departed.

At midnight Bat and Mr. Nanny were aroused from their slumbers by the furious galloping of a horse which stopped before the house. The rider flung himself from the

saddle and pounded vigorously upon the door with the butt of his quirt and shouted for admittance. Bat hurried to the door, while Mr. Nanny sat up in bed blinking dazedly at the light.

"What's up?" shouted Bat.

"Open the door!" replied Mr. Ferguson's voice in peremptory tones; "and hurry."

Bat swung open the door and Frosty burst into the room.

"Get up!" he yelled, rushing over to Mr. Nanny's bed.

"Wha' zer ma'r'?" mildly inquired that bacchanalian.

"The sheriff's after you!" Frosty shouted, shaking him vigorously.

"Me?" inquired Mr. Nanny sleepily. "Wha' for?"

"For horse stealing!" replied Mr. Ferguson. "You stole Bill Simmond's bay cutting pony, while you were acting up there in town and didn't know what you were do-

ing, and sold him for eight dollars to buy more rum," added Frosty sternly. "A posse is out after you. They'll be here in less than ten minutes. I ran my horse all the way to save you. You're a dead man if they catch you, sure!"

"Don' le'm ketch me, then," observed Mr. Nanny, complacently, lying down again. "I leave it all to you, boys."

Mr. Ferguson glared at him for a minute and then jerked him up into a sitting position.

"Are you coming with me, now, or will you stay and be hung?" he demanded sternly.

Mr. Nanny appeared to cogitate for a time, closing one eye shrewdly. "What 'ud you do if you was me?" he debated.

"I'd try to act as if I had sense," Frosty responded, striving manfully to control himself. "Will you follow me and get away safe, or stay and be strung up to the nearest

tree for the buzzards to peck at? Take your choice."

"I believe I'll go along with you!" decided Mr. Nanny, looking proudly from one to another.

"All right," replied Frosty, much relieved, wiping his forehead. "You get outside and climb that pinto of yours and skip lively. I got a plan for escape all worked out."

Mr. Nanny began to put on his clothes. "Where we goin'?" he asked. "How far is it? I done a lot of work to-day and I'm tired. Besides I get a cold in my head if I go 'round much nights."

"You'll be cold all over if the posse gets you," replied his rescuer. Mr. Nanny stared hard at him for the space of a moment and then hurriedly finished dressing.

"Come on, now, if you're ready," said Frosty, impatiently. "I've fixed it up with that old fellow that's camping down by the river with the big covered wagon, to hide you

in it and get you out of the country. He's some kind of a travelling professor, or preacher. Stir yourself now, or they'll get us both. I'm taking a chance with my own life just to save you."

Grabbing the now thoroughly alarmed Mr. Nanny by the arm, Frosty rushed him out, cutting short his minute directions for the care and feeding of James, and they galloped off.

Frosty returned just as Bat was sitting down to breakfast. He looked tired and sleepy, but pride radiated from his countenance.

"How did you work it?" Bat inquired, as he poured his deliverer a large, vigorous cup of coffee.

"Easy enough," answered Frosty loftily. "Strategy did it. You see, the old professor is a travelling temperance revivalist, and I let him have Uncle Nat to use at his meetings for a horrible example. He was mighty glad

to get him. Gave me ten dollars for him."

Bat stared. "Frosty," he said in tones of awe, "that Napoleon sport didn't have it any on you."

"Oh, it's nothing," returned Mr. Ferguson modestly. "Strategy is the stuff. You have to have the brain for it, that's all. It's easy when you understand it. Have some more ham, Old Timer, it's fine."

"I sure will," replied Bat with alacrity, passing up his plate. "Let's fry the whole blame thing and eat it, just to show our independence. I'll make another pot of coffee, too."

Suddenly a shrill whistle sounded from the porch. Frosty started nervously, but was reassured when Bat rose with a grin and beckoned him outside. They reached the door just in time to see Rusty come racing madly up from the corral. "Get out of here, sir!" said the parrot severely, when the deluded dog reached the steps. Rusty dropped

his tail between his legs and skulked off again, casting foolish glances over his shoulder. James went off into a gale of hoarse laughter.

"Ain't that bird the damnedest?" observed Bat admiringly. "He does that twenty times a day, and it always works. He's wearin' that dog plumb out."

Ten days later as Bat and Frosty, returning from a *rodeo* over on Plum Creek, forded the river below the ranch house, they saw smoke rising from the chimney.

"Hello, got a visitor at your house?" inquired Frosty in surprise.

Bat looked up nervously and stared long at the house. Then he turned to his companion. "Say, Frosty," he said huskily, "you don't suppose he's come back again?"

With an effort Frosty retained his composure. "No, there's no danger of that. He'd be afraid to show up here on account

of that horse stealing business. Get him off your mind and stop worrying, Bat. We fixed him this time, sure." Mr. Ferguson laughed mirthlessly and eyed the house with anxiety as they drew near.

They dismounted at the door.

"Go 'long in, Frosty, and make yourself at home," urged Bat hospitably. "I got to fix my saddle. The cinch ring is loose. It'll only take me a minute."

"I'll help you," exclaimed Frosty generously, "and we'll get through sooner." He hurried over to his friend's side.

"Oh, never mind," said Bat ungraciously, dropping the stirrup. "I can mend it tomorrow if there's going to be so much fuss made. Hadn't we better go in?"

After a moment or two's confusion, owing to the polite reluctance of each to take precedence over his friend in entering the house, they opened the door and crowded in together.

"Shut that door!" came the sharp command, and Mr. Nanny straightened up from the stove where he was frying flapjacks. "Wuz you raised in a sawmill?"

"No, sir," said Bat meekly, and sat down. Uncle Nat peered into the stove. "Put on your coat and go get some wood," he said, "and don't stop to fool on the way."

Bat went out. The old man eyed Frosty severely for a minute, without speaking.

"Who are you looking at?" finally inquired Mr. Ferguson uneasily.

"At my preserver," replied Uncle Nat, still glaring at his victim. "Hev you rescued any more fugitives from justice since I been gone?" he questioned with sour sarcasm.

Before Frosty was able to formulate a satisfactory answer to this query, Bat entered with the wood. He threw it in the corner and sat down by the stove. A dead silence ensued. When the meal was ready they seated themselves at the table. The parrot

climbed up on Bat's knee and lovingly chewed his finger.

"What became of the professor?" Bat ventured to inquire of the traveller, when the last of Uncle Nat's flapjacks had disappeared.

"He's in jail," responded Mr. Nanny briefly, filling his corncob pipe.

"Oh, hell!" commented James, in shocked tones.

Bat laughed. "I thought he was a temperance revivalist. What's he in jail for?"

"For bein' drunk and disorderly and bustin' a constable over the nose," replied Uncle Nat, complacently sucking his pipe.

"W-w-where were you?" questioned Frosty, emboldened by his curiosity.

"I wuz conductin' the meetin'," replied Mr. Nanny with a superior air. "We had a great many out that night, and the professor not showing up, I opened the services with my song as usual."

"Your song!" Bat interrupted with a grin. "What did you sing?"

"I sang a very touchin' little ballard entitled, 'Lips That Touch Liquor Shall Never Touch Mine!' and they wasn't a dry eye in the house when I got through. I'll sing 'em for you."

"Never mind," said Bat. "Don't bother about it."

Mr. Nanny glared at him.

"I mean not right now," he added hastily. "I read somewhere once that it wasn't safe to go in swim—that is, to sing for two hours after eating."

"Tell us about the professor," interposed Frosty, influenced by the same uncontrollable impulse that brings criminals back to the scene of their crime. "He was drunk?"

"He must hev been," affirmed Mr. Nanny. "He told me some turrible funny things." Uncle Nat eyed his auditors meaningly. "He told me I never stole any hoss, and

they wasn't no posse after me at all, and he said you got ten dollars——"

"Ha, ha!" cackled Frosty, rudely interrupting the narrative and rising hurriedly from the table. "That's all right. Come to think of it, I have got ten dollars I've been keeping for you, Uncle Nat, because I didn't know where to send it. I'll give it to you tomorrow. Good-bye, Bat, I must be going."

Mr. Ferguson grabbed up his hat and, opening a door, walked into the pantry.

"Come right out of that," said Uncle Nat, sternly. "Ain't you had enough to eat? I never see such a glutton!"

Frosty backed hastily out and, finding the door, escaped.

Bat joined him outside. "What are you going to do now?" he said hoarsely, clutching Frosty.

"Leave it to me!" replied Mr. Ferguson darkly. "I welcome the problem. I'm beginning to see that ordinary methods won't

do in this case. It's going to take genius to handle it. But don't worry, Bat." The strategist tapped his forehead impressively. "Leave it to me!" he repeated once more, and rode off.

The following Sunday Uncle Nat came home from the post-office looking very important and acting mysteriously. Bat saw him standing before the fragment of mirror nailed to a post near the pump, examining his features with great interest, and trying to look like Daniel Webster, while the parrot watched him intently.

"What on earth are you doing, now, Uncle Nat?" Bat inquired. "Going to enter a beauty contest?"

But Mr. Nanny scorned to reply. Glowering, he retreated to his room. Bat caught him several times that day reading a letter, which he at once secreted about his person upon Bat's approach. Bat said nothing to Mr. Nanny, but confided in Frosty.

"What do you suppose he's up to?" he inquired of that superior mind, when he had reported the occurrences.

Frosty gave an inscrutable smile.

"Don't you worry," he advised. "Lots of queer things are liable to happen in the next few weeks, and don't you do or say anything about 'em. You understand?"

Bat did not, but he followed instructions blindly. Mr. Nanny spent the entire morning of the following day inditing an epistle to his unknown correspondent, while Bat did the housework.

A few days later Bat burst in on Frosty, as he was branding a little bunch of calves in the corral back of his house.

"What's the matter now?" inquired Mr. Ferguson, sitting on a calf's head.

"A whole lot's the matter!" replied Bat shortly. "That old cuss wants me to give him four dollars to get his picture taken. He says he might get killed any minute a-riding

'round on a old, blind horse, and I'd have no likeness of him on the place. What do you think of that?"

"Give him the money," said Frosty earnestly, and he contorted his right eye in a strenuous wink.

Bat stared at him coldly. "I'll see him in hell first! What do I want of his old picture?"

"See here!" returned Frosty sternly. "If I'm going to run this game you've got to obey orders."

"All right," agreed Bat resignedly. "I will. But whatever it is you're trying to do, cut it short as you can. He's gone to work and ironed out my best black suit and he's home there now a-takin' in the seams to fit him. I reckon he's going to wear it to get his picture taken in."

"That's nothing," consoled Frosty. "It'll soon be over, and what's a suit?" he added airily, lighting his cigarette.

"You let him have yours then," suggested Bat resentfully.

Frosty stared at him. "Don't I furnish the brains? I guess you can supply the clothes," he said severely; and Bat retired, subdued but unconvinced.

Mr. Nanny saddled up the pinto pony next morning and rode away in high spirits—and the suit of Bat's clothes. He stayed all night in town while the travelling photographer finished up his pictures. In the afternoon he reappeared at the ranch and resumed his usual habiliments. He placed eleven likenesses of himself, as he appeared in the borrowed plumage, about the house at various points of vantage, driving Mr. Henderson nearly into a frenzy.

Upon the receipt, some days later, of a letter and a large photograph, not his own, Uncle Nat, much excited, announced that business required his presence in San Fran-

cisco immediately and that he needed forty dollars.

Mr. Henderson, without trusting himself to speak, saddled his horse and went in search of Frosty.

"This is the limit," he said grimly, and gave an account of the latest imposition.

"It's the end of the limit, too," responded Frosty, confidently. "You'd better say good-bye to him. It's the last you'll see of Uncle Nat."

"You're sure about that?" said Bat doubtfully.

"Sure as shooting," replied Frosty firmly. "Here's where strategy triumphs in the end."

"I wish I knew how you did it," said Bat, gazing in deep admiration at Mr. Ferguson.

Frosty permitted himself a superior smile. "I'll tell you when he's gone," he promised.

When Mr. Nanny rode off the following morning on the faithful pinto Bat accom-

panied him as far as the road, after bidding him a really affectionate farewell.

"Don't fergit, Christmas is 'most here. It's jest one week from to-day," was Mr. Nanny's parting injunction to Bat. For the first time his jaunty confidence appeared to fail him as he issued his last directions. "My things for you and Frosty is under the bed in a box you'll find there. Don't you open 'em till the time comes. I hope they suit, but if they don't," he added with a touch of acid in his voice, "it's your own faults fer not makin' out a list like I told you. Good-bye."

Bat watched him as he rode away down the road. In the absorption of getting rid of Mr. Nanny, Bat had allowed himself no time for reflection. Now a sudden feeling of loneliness came over him. "It looks like he was gone for good this time," he said, half aloud. "Wasn't he the great old coot—always a-workin' over something!"

His thoughts fell upon the last instructions he had received in regard to Christmas. "Think of him a-leavin' presents for——" His musings came to an abrupt halt. He glanced after the retreating figure that was rapidly disappearing from view.

"Hi!" he yelled, inspired by a sudden happy thought, "you can keep the pinto—I give him to you!"

Uncle Nat waved his hand. "You kin hev James!" he called back, and thus they parted.

Frosty had ridden over to Magalia to bring up a bunch of cattle that he and Bat were wintering on shares, and several days passed before his return. It was late in the afternoon that the herd reached the crossing of Battle Creek and, leaving the boys to hold them, Frosty pushed on into town and put up at the "Golden Rule." Early next morning he rode out to Bat's ranch and, turning his pony into the corral, joined his friend on the

bench before the cabin, where he sat with the parrot for company.

Frosty, glad to be back on the range, beamed joyfully upon his partner. "Hello, Old Timer," he greeted him. "I guess maybe you're not feeling pretty fine these days, huh? Seems kind of nice, doesn't it, to be your own boss again for a change!"

"Sure, I feel all right," Bat responded slowly. "How's the cattle?"

"They're all in good shape. Got in last night. The boys are holding 'em down below on the big flat till we can look 'em over. Came through all in fine style. Didn't lose a hoof."

Bat nodded listlessly. "That's good," he said.

"Well, you don't appear very gay over it, seems to me," commented Frosty, eyeing his companion closely. "Been sick; or what ails you?"

"No, I'm first rate. Just kind of glum, I

reckon. Say, do you know," Bat confided with some hesitation, "I believe I miss having old Uncle Nat 'round. It seems kind of lonesome-like without him." He stuck his finger into the cage and scratched the parrot's head thoughtfully.

Frosty stared at him in undisguised amazement. "I thought you wanted to get rid of him," he said finally.

"Well, I did," answered Bat. "But I'll tell you how it is." He pulled the brim of his sombrero down over his eyes and looked at his boots. "You see, it's this way. I got kind of used to havin' him 'round, kickin' all the time and fussin' over me, and I sorter miss it now that he's gone."

"Well, what do you think of that?" observed Mr. Ferguson in a pained voice addressing the scenery.

"If I didn't get things just to suit him," Bat went on, ignoring the last remark, "he used to make a row and it sorter kept me up

to scratch. Of course," he added slowly, "I didn't enjoy it, but now, durn it, there's no one to give a damn how I fry the ham or make the coffee. It's a fact, I don't enjoy my meals any more—don't take any interest in 'em, so to speak."

Bat turned his troubled face to his partner and suddenly began to laugh. "Isn't that the durndest idea you ever heard of?" he observed.

"It certainly is," agreed Frosty, grinning in turn.

"Having James here helps some," Bat continued, "but, just the same, I wish instead of sending him off I had put him over there on that hundred and sixty I got across the river. There's a good house on it and he'd 'a' been all right and comfortable."

"Now don't you go worryin' about him, Bat," counselled Frosty, soothingly. "He's gone for good and your troubles are over; but don't you ever up and save anybody's

life again, so long as you live, without seeing me about it first. I won't pull you out of such a hole another time. It's too wearing on me."

"Tell us about it," said Bat. "How did you do it, anyway?"

"I married him," replied Frosty calmly.

"You *what*?" Bat shouted, staring at his informant wide-eyed.

"Yep," responded Mr. Ferguson, "that is, I got him married to a lady."

"To a lady!" repeated Bat idiotically.

"Sure, to a lady!" reiterated Frosty, showing signs of irritation. "To a blonde widow lady, with an affectionate disposition—quiet, refined, and home-loving, fond of children."

Bat gazed in amazement at his friend as, with an astonishing air of familiarity, he rolled off this speech.

"Uncle Nat," Frosty went on gleefully, "is a re-fined gentleman of means, who seeks a loving mate. Is musical, entertaining, and

is prepared to shower upon the lady of his choice, loving attention and a luxurious home. Object matrimony."

"But, look-a-here!" interrupted Bat, as Frosty paused for breath, "that won't go. Why, the——"

"Now don't you worry, my son," was Frosty's advice, given in his largest manner. "You've seen the last you're ever going to of Uncle Nat. I've attended to his case." Frosty rolled a cigarette as he proceeded. "I told you I'd do it, and I did. We fell down on the first few attempts, it's true, and I'm not denying it; but I didn't take much pains with them. This time I used real strategy of the highest order, and it never fails."

He waved his hand comprehensively at the landscape.

Bat was silent, staring at the ground. Suddenly he spoke.

"Do you happen to know what day this

is?" he inquired with an attempt at making his remark seem commonplace.

"Tuesday, isn't it?" responded Frosty lazily. "What of it, anyway?"

"Sure it's Tuesday, but it's something else besides," Bat proceeded. "It's Christmas!"

"Why, that's so, she is," agreed Frosty. "Looks like good weather, too. If the rains keep a-coming easy the way they have so far the stock'll do fine. There's one little bunch I got from Old Man Apple that are a little——"

"Say, can't you ever take a day off and think of something else besides cows!" interrupted Bat disgustedly. "We was talkin' about Christmas, wasn't we?"

Frosty stared with his mouth open. "Well, for the love of—— SAY! What's got into you?" he demanded. "You sound just like old Uncle Nat, himself." Frosty glanced behind him, apprehensively, as if he half expected to see Mr. Nanny in

the flesh. His gaze penetrated the open doorway of the house and he stopped short, bereft of speech.

In the centre of the room, before the fireplace, stood an unmistakable Christmas tree. At its foot a heap of large rocks were piled to hold it upright. From top to bottom it was decorated with tinsel and ornaments, mute evidence that Jimmison's store in Four Horse Flat had been depleted of its entire stock, while from the lower branches hung a number of closely wrapped and mysterious looking parcels. All was in readiness for the lighting of the candles.

Frosty grasped Bat by the arm and addressed him in a hoarse whisper.

"He—that bus—that business in there! Uncle Nat ain't around anywhere, is he?"

"N—no, oh, no! He hasn't showed up this time," Bat relieved his fears. "That is—he ain't 'round so's you can see him. But, don't you know, while I was a-fixin' up that

blamed tree," Bat went hurriedly on, resolutely ignoring the look on his partner's face as he made the announcement, "I had a feelin' all the time that he *was* here in the spirit, so to speak! Made me feel sort of funny. Maybe he'll get back in time yet. She's still only Christmas morning."

Frosty regarded him, a little dazed.

"What's all those packages a-hanging there? Who they for?"

"Why, some of 'em are for you!" declared Bat warmly. "I reckon it's all right to tell you that much, but you mustn't look. See that long one down near the bottom—the one with the red string? She's one. Old Uncle Nat's got wrote on it. 'Merry Christmas to Frosty, from Nathaniel H. Nanny,' and below it says, 'Use as directed.' I think," Bat partially enlightened him, "that it's some bitters he was a-makin' before he left. I saw him a-washin' out a bottle that was about that size, and last time you was

here, he spoke several times about the whites of your eyes lookin' yellow. Remember?"

"Sure I do!" Frosty exploded, staring. "Well, the old son-of-a-gun! A-fixin' up a present for me! Why——! Say, how about all of them other things?"

Bat beamed jubilantly upon him.

"Never you mind! I promised I wouldn't peek and you ain't a-goin' to either. Some of 'em is for me and they's more for you, too. He was a-crochetin' things day and night for the last three weeks before he went and, come to find out, they was mostly for you and me. Do you hear that! And here we——say, who'd 'a' thought it of him?"

"What have we got for him!" demanded Frosty in a sudden panic. "That's the question. S'pose he *was* to get back, where'd we be!" He glared at Bat.

"I got a few little things, just to have in the house," offered Bat apologetically. "Bought 'em when I was in town a day or

two ago. You can never tell when Christmas presents'll come in handy. Lucky, when I came to look 'em over several'll do for him. I tied 'em on the tree, just to be on the safe side in case he *was* to come."

"I got a turk for dinner, too, off from Mis' Sanders, out on the ridge, and he's a-cookin' this minute there in the stove. Thought I'd start him plenty early."

"Good! That's the best idea you ever had since I knew you. But, say," demanded Frosty, rousing himself anxiously, "how 'bout me? I got to have something for him on the tree, after all the trouble he went to makin' that mess for me to take for my liver! Here,—I'll tell you what. I don't think for a minute he's really coming, but this here's no time to hold back. I'm a-going to take this gun of mine and put her on the tree for him. She's my second best gun, anyway, so to speak, and he hasn't got one to his name. I'll never miss it."

Bat stood speechless while Frosty unbuckled his belt and removed his Colt's .45, holster and all, and stepping gingerly up to the tree laid it across the lower branches.

"She sure looks pretty nice, Bat, the way you got her rigged out!" murmured Frosty admiringly as he stood off to get the full effect of the display.

"Y—yes, the tree's all right," admitted Bat, his enthusiasm somewhat diminished. "It takes more'n a tree, though, to make a Christmas. Now, if the old man was only here——"

"Old Man, nothing!" snorted Frosty, striving to keep off dangerous ground. "What we want," he proceeded to lay down the rules for Bat's benefit, "is *Kids!*"

Frosty seated himself on the bench and rolled another cigarette. Bat dropped down beside him.

"Here's what we'll do. You lope over an' borrow some off from Fisher. Two'll do;

but if you can get three or four, why, all the better!"

"Frosty," said Bat, shaking his head slowly in mild reproof, "you've sure got a head on you and you're long on strategy, but when you get onto the subject of children you're way off. Folks don't lend their kids—specially at Christmas time. Fishers 've got a Christmas tree of their own an'—an' I'll bet every one of 'em hung up their socks."

"Uh-huh," agreed Frosty solemnly. "What we've done—we've gone and tackled something we ain't equal to alone. That's the size of it. Neither one of us thought about the socks."

"I was a plumb fool to ever start it," offered Bat accusingly. "Just the same, if Uncle Nat was here he'd——" Bat stared down at the ground.

"Well, he isn't," broke in Frosty, with a show of spirit. "What's the matter with us! We ought to be mighty glad to get rid

of him. He's married by this time, doggone it; and that's the last of *him*!

"Nope," resumed Frosty confidently, pausing to scratch a match on the bench, "he won't ever bother you again. Next time you sit down to a plate of real fried ham and a good cup of coffee, maybe you'll thank me, your deliv——!"

His voice trailed off into thin air and he stopped, with his mouth open and the burning match between his fingers.

Bat looked up. He stared for a moment down the road as though seeing a vision. Then he started forward with beaming face.

Around a turn came Uncle Nat, and he was leading the pinto pony. That faithful animal was almost hidden from view beneath a mountain of bundles, bags, and baskets, but from his one good eye shone a gleam of joy in his homecoming which was magnified many times in the face of the returned traveller.

The match burned itself out against

Frosty's fingers. His legs were stretched limply before him, and he seemed to have lost the power of speech.

Bat took a few steps forward and then suddenly halted as though frozen in his tracks. From behind the pony appeared a tired-looking little woman followed by four small, tow-headed children. Her faded hair had fallen about her face. She was pretty, but she looked a bit weary, as though the battle with the world had been too much for her.

Bat's hat was off and he bowed low. She smiled a little, and clung to Uncle Nat's arm.

"How d'ye do, boys?" said Uncle Nat, with a jaunty attempt at unconcern. "Merry Christmas!"

The parrot, still occupying his place on the bench beside the door, cocked his head to one side. "And the cat came back!" he announced in deep disgust.

Uncle Nat glared angrily at the unconscious bird. Bat strode forward, ignoring alike Uncle Nat's polite salutation and the parrot's pleasant greeting. He stretched out his long arms, with a great smile on his broad face, and caught up two of the children and held them high over his head. The others flung themselves gleefully upon the weak but smiling Frosty and climbed the legs of his hairy chaps. Uncle Nat looked on with an air of pleased proprietorship, while the tired-looking little woman smiled happily.

"Boys," said Uncle Nat, making another attempt to attract some attention, "I want to introduce you to my wife and her——," he checked himself with a modest little cough, "and our children."

The parrot stuck his head far out between the bars of the cage. "Oh, hell!" he croaked scornfully, and dodged hastily back,

as the outraged Uncle Nat aimed a vicious blow at his head.

Mrs. Nanny turned a pair of mildly reproachful blue eyes upon her husband. "Is that the parrot you were telling me about?" she inquired even before she shook hands with Bat and Frosty. That ceremony over she returned to the bird. "You know, dear, it won't do at all to have that kind of talk going on where the children are," she postulated gently, and waited, her compelling gaze fixed upon him, while Mr. Nanny shuffled uneasily in his place.

"Of course—, you're right—something'll hev to be done about it!" he exploded suddenly, resuming command of the situation. "It ain't goin' to be allowed, that's all." Uncle Nat eyed Bat in stern reproof. "We'll 'tend to his case if something ain't done mighty quick! The saloon-keeper down in the Flat has asked me for him

more'n once, and he'll git him if a change ain't made."

Bat and Frosty stared at each other for a moment in silent amazement and then both at the miracle worker. There had been times when they would have been willing to burn the house down to get rid of the parrot, had they not known that he would probably have flown into a near-by tree and miscalled them for their trouble, and here was a person who only had to say "dear" once to Uncle Nat, and the deed was done! Their reflections were terminated by Mr. Nanny's suddenly whirling in and taking charge of affairs.

"Now git to work, everybody, and see that somethin's done 'round here besides talkin'. We'll jest hev a bite to eat, now, and then nothin' more till dinner time. I'm goin' to see to the fire right this minit." He disappeared inside the house, being gone but a moment.

"Hi—you Frosty—go an' fetch a armful of wood an' be mighty quick about it, too. 'Nother minit an' that there turk 'ud 'a' been spiled for good. That's the way with you fellers—put things in the oven an' then go off an' let the fire die down! Got no more sense'n——"

"Suppose I take charge of the dinner," suggested Mrs. Nanny quietly, smiling on the group. "Then you all can finish fixing the beautiful, big tree I've been admiring through the doorway. We've got some things for it, too."

"That's the idea, exactly!" Mr. Nanny hastened to agree, while Bat beamed his approval. Frosty, with two of the children riding on his back and the others hanging to his chaps, started after the wood. Mrs. Nanny disappeared into the kitchen, from whence there immediately came the clatter of pans and dishes, while Uncle Nat, with Bat's active assistance, unloaded the pinto.

Everyone was busy, and happy. As Bat and Mr. Nanny approached the house with their load of bundles, Mrs. Nanny emerged from the kitchen.

"What do you boys want for lunch?" she asked of Bat.

"Anything that won't be too much trouble for you, Ma'am," was his earnest reply.

"Oh, I love to cook!" exclaimed Mrs. Nanny eagerly, while the colour began to come back into the faded cheeks. "I found a beautiful fat ham hanging in the store-room when I was poking around. Would you like some of that fried, with a pan of baking-powder biscuits I can stir up in a minute?"

"Fine!" breathed Bat, rapturously. "I'll fetch some water from the spring to freshen it in."

Mrs. Nanny looked a bit puzzled and anxious.

"—To freshen it?" she repeated after him

with her eyes on Bat's face. "Why,—do you always do that? It looked like a nice fresh ham."

"She is!" Bat declared vigorously, a gleam of hope appearing on his broad countenance. "You see, Ma'am, he—I—I used to fry it just the way she came, an' liked it, but Uncle Nat was for freshening it up first, and so——"

"Nonsense. Who ever heard of such a thing!" Mrs. Nanny looked straight at her husband as she spoke, and she kept right on smiling her gentle little smile. "The idea of ruining a delicious ham that way. Sillies!"

Almost unable to realise what was happening Bat turned to where Uncle Nat was busily affixing more parcels to the tree, fat, mysterious, interesting looking bundles that had come from town. Mr. Nanny paused in his work to gaze benevolently upon the two. He nodded his head wisely.

"She knows!" he proclaimed with an air of finality.

Bat leaned weakly against the wall. Mrs. Nanny returned to prepare the meal. Suddenly Bat started as he heard the gleeful shouts of the children returning with the wood, and at the same moment a hot, sizzling sound came from the kitchen, accompanied by the appetizing odour of frying ham.

A great, slow, warm smile grew on Mr. Bat Henderson's countenance. For a moment his gaze rested upon the figure of Uncle Nat, busy at the tree, and then as the shouts came nearer he went out through the open doorway to meet the children and Frosty, knowing in his heart that for himself and his partner Christmas had come indeed.

THE END





